

Four years since the looting of the National Museum

The plunder of Iraqi antiquities continues

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The looting of the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad during the American invasion four years ago was the beginning of a cultural catastrophe for that country. Over 15,000 precious objects were taken from the museum, many of which dated back thousands of years and had inestimable scientific and artistic value. The museum's equipment and furniture were stolen. Display cases were smashed. Objects that could not be taken were destroyed.

The looting was permitted by the American military and was a policy decision of the Bush administration. It signaled the intention of American imperialism not only to rob Iraq of its natural resources and pauperize its people, but also to destroy its culture, a central aspect of the ongoing sociocide being carried out against Iraq—the destruction of an entire society.

In four years, nearly every facet of Iraqi science, art, and education has been vandalized. Libraries have been burned down or closed. Universities are bombed. Most children do not attend school, and academics, teachers, and other professionals have been assassinated or driven into exile.

The looting of the museum between April 9 and 12, 2003 revealed the deep contempt that the leaders of the world's most technologically advanced nation held for world culture and the heritage of thousands of years of civilization.

The Iraq Museum was no ordinary institution. It contained artifacts from some of the world's oldest advanced cultures. Agriculture, the foundation of complex social structures, is believed to have appeared in Iraq as long as 11,000 years ago.

The domestication of animals, the invention of the wheel, and metalworking are also believed to have had an early development in Iraq. The cities of Sumer based on the first sophisticated irrigation networks along the Tigris and Euphrates grew up over 6,000 years ago. It is likely that the Sumerians, who lived in the south of Iraq, invented writing to organize the increasingly complex

political and social needs of their city-states.

But because of the American occupation of Iraq, this history is being destroyed daily. In the four years since the looting of the museum, Iraq's many archaeological sites have become targets of looters who supply artifacts to the international antiquities trade.

Speaking to the *Independent*, Roger Matthews, chairman of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, said, "Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime the occupying powers in Iraq have signally failed to invest the funds and energies needed to protect the cultural heritage of Iraq which is ultimately under their guardianship." He and other academics have accused the British government of reneging on a promise made after the looting to the museum to fund the protection of Iraq's heritage sites.

The *Independent* also cited Professor Elizabeth Stone, professor of anthropology at Stony Brook University in New York. Stone has studied thousands of satellite images of archaeological sites.

"In the big sites there is organised looting where people are bussed by the antiquities dealers," she said. "Police who tried to sort out the looters at Umma [a major Sumerian archeological site] were outgunned. The looters came with their own guards. The illegal antiquities trade is no different form the illegal drugs trade. There are major cities being totally destroyed."

Recently, *The Chicago Tribune* noted that some of these sites "are so rich that one of Stone's research teams uncovered 20,000 ceramic objects at one site in just a few months before the war. In clay pots stuffed like safety deposit boxes, they found wills, lists of who lived in houses, their friends, business dealings—almost everything to do with daily Mesopotamian society."

Archaeologists methodically document the placement and disposition of each artifact in order to gain the maximum possible information about it. Although stolen objects may themselves eventually be recovered, since they have been removed from their archaeological

context, decisive information about their age, history, and use is irreparably lost.

The WSWS attended a lecture on the anniversary of the looting of the Iraqi Museum by its former head, Donny George, at Stony Brook University in New York.

George began by saying that before the invasion in 2003 “we knew that something would happen, that the museum would be targeted.”

George and his staff stayed as long as possible at the museum but on April 8 they saw armed men on the grounds. They left because they were afraid of getting caught in the crossfire. The next day, George attempted to return but was told by friends, “The whole area is controlled by American forces. Whoever moves is shot.”

When George was able to reach American headquarters at the Palestine Hotel on Sunday, April 13, a Marine Colonel asked him, “Is there anything of value in the museum?” George calculated that over 15,000 items had been stolen and of these, 3,709 were returned. Some are being held in foreign countries now for safekeeping.

George went on to detail the destruction in the museum, the presence of glasscutters, and the piles of trash that indicated that vandals intended to burn the museum, as had been done with other government museums.

He noted that in the weeks after the looting, in response to a call by religious leaders, many of the stolen objects were returned. About the half of the objects were reclaimed, including a number of spectacular pieces. Police and the Americans in Iraq and abroad, especially in Jordan, seized other objects, but most of them were pirated out of the country to be sold.

After a mass kidnapping close to the museum in August 2006, George decided to seal up the building. He showed slides of the thick brick walls and steel gates that now barricade the entrances inside and outside the building.

George then showed slides of the cratered landscapes where looters had dug for antiques at the sites of ancient cities such as Umma. He observed that 16,077 of the objects that had been returned to the museum, either voluntarily or by the police, did not come from the museum’s collection at all, but were freshly dug from looted sites around Iraq. He asked, “If this is what is being returned, then what is being taken?”

The WSWS spoke with George after his talk. Earlier that day a truck bomb had destroyed the 75-year-old al-Sarafiya bridge in that connected Shia and Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad, killing 10 Iraqis.

George spoke with sadness about the loss of life and the destruction of this piece of Iraqi cultural heritage. We

asked him about the surge. “None of the problems can be solved by military means,” he said.

When asked if the Americans were responsible for the looting he said, “according to Hague Conventions they had to protect it. They did not do anything.”

He refuted the claims of the official American investigator, Col. Matthew Bogdanos, that the museum grounds had been prepared in advance as a defensive position by the Baath regime. The sandbagged trenches that the colonel found were dug for the protection of the staff. “I ordered the positions to be put there.”

As to a discarded uniform that Col. Bogdanos’s team found, George said that it belonged to a young archaeologist doing his military service, who had been ordered to discard it by the former regime.

He added, “I think the looters were encouraged by the Americans, in one way or another. We do know that in other public buildings the American troops opened the doors and said, ‘Come on in and take what you want.’ Why was this technologically advanced army not given the order to protect the museum?”

On April 10, amid the carnage of Baghdad, employees and friends held a candlelight vigil at the museum itself to commemorate the looting. Photos of the event can be viewed [here](http://www.savingantiquities.org/IraqMuseumovigil.htm) [http://www.savingantiquities.org/IraqMuseumovigil.htm].



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